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SUBJECT: (SBU) Visionary Monument or Bromdignagian Folly?

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Between December 1-14, 2009 Senegal will host the World Festival of Negro Arts (FESNAM). The event will focus on African renaissance and is also meant to coincide with the unveiling of a fifty-meter high "African Renaissance statue" commissioned by President Abdoulaye Wade. Wade conceived of this monument to cement his cultural legacy, but for many people the statue's 16 million dollar price tag confirms their belief that, despite the deep crisis in Senegal's public finances, the President is most interested in grandiose projects that the Senegalese people have little use for. End Summary.

Need for a monument

¶2. (SBU) According to the Department of Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture, the idea for the monument came from Wade's conception of what "Africa's destiny should be." The monument is being built on an extinct volcano on Dakar's western tip. It is described by a GOS document as: "The monument represents an African man emerging from a volcano, facing the West, with his wife and he is holding his child up as if to show him to the world. It symbolizes Africa, freed from centuries of imprisonment in the dark abyss of ignorance, intolerance and racism; Africa regaining its place in the world bathed in light, air, and freedom."

Poor artistic quality

¶3. (SBU) According to a senior figure at the Ministry of culture, it is Wade himself who made the initial drawing of the statue after which the North Koreans finished the design but with a distinctly Stalinesque feel. The Ministry of Culture and a private architect later stepped in to rework the design of the woman to return to it a touch of "female sensuality, especially in the way they had covered her and her thighs." "Still," the rather disappointed contact said, "the features remain definitely Soviet."

A grandiose, costly project

¶4. (SBU) The Director of Cultural Heritage at the Ministry told Embassy staff that, in a recent visit to North Korea, he saw that all the pieces of the statue had been molded. He said that the structure will be almost 165 feet high. Given its placement on the extinct volcano, its highest point will essentially match that of the Statue of Liberty in terms of elevation above sea level. Underneath the plinth there will be a three-story building that will include three large conference rooms and exhibition halls. At the tune of an additional three billion CFA (USD six million), the site plans include a privately built shopping center and a hotel. Financing the project has been murky and the subject of much discussion. Originally, it was reported that the GOS had offered the North Korean builders and enormous tract of prime development land outside Dakar. It is now rumored that the offer was declined. Instead, a businessman and political ally of the Mayor of Dakar, is said to have been given a tract of land in an upscale district in Dakar with instructions to develop it and use the proceeds to settle the bill.

Comment

5(SBU) The monument is meant to be part of President Wade's cultural legacy to his people. However, in the minds of many this is nothing but a pharaonic project commissioned by an aging President obsessed with history and his place in it. In many respects the monument, conceived by Wade as symbol of African emancipation, is more symbolic of what is wrong in Senegal - wasteful spending, an opaque deal, cronyism run rampant, relations with a pariah state; all happening while people stretch their meager budgets to be able to eat once a day.

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